

**Factors Affecting Christians' Perceptions of Buddhists,
Hindus and Muslims in the U.S.**

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Abstract

This study uses data from the Religion and Diversity Survey to assess what variables influence Christians' perceptions of Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims. Variables associated with the perceptions of these groups are belief in religious diversity, contact with these religious groups, region of the country in which one resides, a decreasing interest in spirituality, age, familiarity with the teachings of these religious groups, and feeling influenced by these religious groups. Implications of these findings for the planning of programs to enhance Christians' knowledge about these religious groups are discussed.

Biography

Mary Kay Jou, LSW, LMSW, is a second year PhD student at Rutgers University School of Social Work, where she also teaches as an Adjunct Professor. Her areas of specialty include Diversity and Oppression, and Social Work with Immigrants and Refugees.

Dr. Antoinette Farmer, Ph.D. is the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at Rutgers University School of Social Work. Her research interests include parenting behavior, kinship care, religion and spirituality, and evaluation of social work practice.

Notes to the Power Point:

Slide Two:

Why such a study? Historically, we know that the U.S. was founded on Christian beliefs. In fact, many of the original settlers came to this country in order to practice their Christian ideals. Presently, we also know that the majority of Americans are still Christian, and that Christianity still holds a powerful place in our society.

Slide Three

In the last decade of the 20th century, there were dramatic increases in numbers of other religious groups (Kosmin, Mayers, and Keysar, 2001). The most notable of these groups are Buddhists (170%), Hindus (237%), and Muslims (109%), with Christians showing an increase of only 5% during those same years (Kosmin et al.).

Slide Four

Dr. Wuthnow (2005), a sociologist at Princeton University, stated that it is important to study Christians' perceptions of these new religious groups.

Slide Five

Numerous studies have been conducted assessing the relationship between religion and prejudice. This relationship has been studied looking at various outgroups, such as racial and ethnic minorities, communists, militants, gays and immigrants. This research has demonstrated that the more religious a person is the more prejudice he or she will be against certain outgroups.

Slide Six

Allport's (1954) Intergroup Contact Theory has been the theoretical framework guiding this research. This theory he states that increased contact with outgroup members has the capacity to reduce negative perceptions of those groups.

Slide Seven

Allport (1954) believes that there are four conditions that must be present for optimal contact to occur. They are

- Equal status of groups
- Common goals
- Intergroup cooperation
- Support of local authorities through laws or customs

Slide Eight

In a recent meta-analysis, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) found that the conditions of optimal contact are not necessary for changes in perceptions to occur.

For these researchers, both direct (friendship with an outgroup member) and indirect (friendship with someone who has a friend who is an outgroup member) reduce negative perceptions.

Slide Nine

We hypothesized that

1. The more contact one has with Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims the better one's perceptions of these religious groups.
2. The more familiarity one has with the teachings of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam the better one's perceptions of these religious groups.

3. Persons who have increasing interest in religion will have negative perceptions of Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims.
4. Persons who have increasing interest in spirituality will have positive perceptions of Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims.

Slide Ten

Additionally, we hypothesized that persons who do not live in the South, those with a college degree, non-Protestants, persons under age 65 and Whites will have better perceptions of Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims.

Slide Eleven

Several exploratory hypotheses were assessed as well.

1. Belief that religious diversity has been good for the U.S. is associated with better perceptions of Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims.
2. The more one feels influenced by the teachings of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam the better one's perceptions of these religious groups.

Slide Twelve

A secondary data analysis of the Religion and Diversity Survey (Wuthnow, 2005) was conducted. The survey was collected through telephone interviews in 2002 and 2003, using randomly selected phone numbers. The demographics of the sample were weighted based on the 2000 U.S. Census Data in order to make the sample nationally representative.

For the purposes of our study we have only used the Christian sample (n=2327).

The demographic characteristics of the sample are as follows:

51% Protestant

Ages 18-91 (mean age = 45)

56% Female

60% Do not live in the South

84% under 65

77% White

66% less than college education

Slide Thirteen

The dependent variables are as follows:

Three separate measures were used to assess perceptions of Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims. The variable is based on an eight-item scale measuring both positive and negative perceptions of these religious groups. The negative terms included: fanatical, violent, strange, backward and close-minded. The positive terms included: peace-loving, tolerant and appealing.

The respondents were asked to rate whether they agreed or disagreed that the terms listed above accurately describe their perceptions of Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims. Their answers were rated on a five-point Likert scale.

Because both positive and negative terms were included, the variables were then recoded so that all items were rated in the same positive direction. The total score for perceptions was then summed resulting in a minimum score of zero and a maximum score of eight.

Slide Fourteen

The independent variables are as follows:

Influenced by Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam (dichotomous).

Interest in Religion, Interest in Spirituality (dummy coded)

Belief that religious diversity has been good for the U.S. (continuous)

Contact with Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims (continuous)

Familiarity with the teachings of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam (continuous)

Slide Fifteen

The social demographic variables are as follows

region of the country (dichotomous)

religious affiliation (dichotomous)

race (dichotomous)

education level (dichotomous)

age was dichotomized, based on findings in the literature (see Moore and Ovardia, 2006)

Slide Sixteen

Because this study includes three separate dependent variables and several independent variables, canonical correlational analysis (CCA) was the statistical method used. CCA allows the researcher to explore more than one set of dependent variable and more than one set of independent variables at the same time. These sets of independent variables and dependent variables comprise two latent variables. The CCA assesses for the degree of association between these two latent variables. The measure of association is known as canonical correlation, which is analogous to the Pearson r (Sherry and Henson, 2005).

Slide Seventeen

This slide provides a visual model to facilitate the reader's understanding of how CCA was utilized in this particular study.

On the left, the independent variables are shown that comprise the latent independent variable into one independent variable. On the right, the reader sees the variables that comprise the latent dependent variable.

Slide Eighteen

Before conducting CCA we looked at the bivariate relationships among the variables of interest to assess the association between the independent variables and the dependent variables, and to assess for issues of multicollinearity.

This slide demonstrates the bivariate relationship between the contact variables and the perception variables. Contact with any of the religious groups is associated with better perceptions of these groups.

Slide Nineteen

Familiarity with the teachings of any of these faiths is associated with better perceptions of members of any of these faiths.

Slide Twenty

A belief that religious diversity has been good for the U.S. is associated with positive perceptions of all three groups.

Slide Twenty-one

Feeling influenced by any of the faiths is associated with positive perceptions of members of any of the three groups.

Slide Twenty-two

As result of the analysis, one or more canonical functions were derived which show the relationship between the canonical variates. Only significant functions are interpreted. The standardized coefficients, using the cutoff point of .30 is examined to determine its

interpretability (Pedhazur, 1997). The next three slides list separately the results of each function.

Looking at the table we can see that the only variable that was associated with perceptions of Buddhists was belief in religious diversity. The results indicate that persons' who do not believe that religious diversity has been good for the U.S. is associated with negative perceptions of Buddhists.

Slide Twenty-three

As can be seen in the table, contact with Muslims, lack of familiarity with Buddhism, a belief in religious diversity, not living in the South, a decreasing interest in spirituality, feeling influenced by Islam, and being older were associated with negative perceptions of Buddhists and positive perceptions of Muslims.

Slide Twenty-four

In the table, contact with Buddhists, unfamiliarity with the teachings of Hinduism, familiarity with the teachings of Buddhism, and not living in the South are associated with positive perceptions of Buddhists and Muslims and negative perceptions of Hindus.

Slides Twenty-five through Twenty-seven

The above findings are summarized.

Slide Twenty-eight

The results of this study that contact with one religious group leads to negative perceptions of another group raises one important question, why does this occur?

We speculate that the fact that Islam is an Abrahamic faith, like Christianity and Buddhism is not, may help to explain the positive perceptions of Muslims and not Buddhists.

One difference in Hinduism is that it is a polytheist religion, which is different than either Islam or Buddhism. This basic difference may have resulted in Christians having negative perceptions of Hindus.

None of the variables that we speculate explain these findings were included in this study.

Slide Twenty-nine

The finding that familiarity led to better perceptions and unfamiliarity led to negative perceptions is consistent with the literature (Corrigan et al., 2001).

Slide Thirty

Persons who believe that religious diversity has been good for the U.S. had negative perceptions of Buddhists, while also having positive perceptions of Muslims. We also found that persons who did not believe in religious diversity had negative perceptions of Buddhists.

Slide Thirty-one

Older people had positive perceptions of Muslims but negative perceptions of Buddhists. The former is surprising given that that it has been noted in the literature that older persons, particularly those age 65 and older are less tolerant than persons under 65 (Moore and Ovadia, 2006).

Slide Thirty-two

The implications for social work practice, education are as follows:

In terms of practice, the findings indicate that both contact and familiarity are important factors for improving perceptions of religious groups. Therefore, drawing from the religious tradition of inter-faith workshops and dialogues, a workshop including experiential activities could be developed which would increase both contact and familiarity with various religious groups.

Field placements provide an excellent opportunity to increase contact and familiarity with various religious groups. The recent call for faith-based services to be involved in providing social services offers an opportunity for students to be placed in ethnic/and faith-based programs.

Slide Thirty-three

Limitations

1. Several limitations relate to the way in which the variables were operationalized. For example, given that there is no consensus in the literature on how to operational contact and familiarity, we relied on one-item measures.
2. In our analysis, we chose to look only at differences between Protestants and non-Protestants. The literature suggests that in order to enhance our understanding of the effect of religion on prejudice, researchers need to go beyond assessing the differences between Protestants and non-Protestants. Scholars suggest that you need to look at the type of Protestant, such as liberal, mainline, fundamental and evangelical (Roof and McKinney, 1985; Smith 1990).
3. Cross sectional data
4. Only looked at one aspect of prejudice (cognitive).

Slide Thirty-four

Future Research should focus on the following:

1. Assessing both cognitive and affective prejudice.
2. Using multi-item and valid measures of contact and familiarity.
3. Qualitative studies are needed to answer the question why does contact with one group lead to negative perceptions of other groups?
4. Examination of the mediating and moderating variables that may affect the relationships found in this study.

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